

NIS Partners Mark Five Years of Progress in Atlanta

Conference Coverage by Joanne Neuber, Julia Ross and Barbara Ruben

While the global emergence of infectious diseases like tuberculosis and diphtheria has created new challenges for health care professionals in recent years, it has also served to unite physicians and nurses across national boundaries in a common quest. The fight to vanquish infectious disease is just one area where AIHA's NIS partner institutions have broken new ground in the five years since the first hospital partnerships were founded.

Last fall, more than 500 US and NIS hospital partners and government and health officials reflected on their progress at the Fifth Annual Partnership Conference for the NIS in Atlanta, Georgia. The overriding themes of the October 6-8 event--infectious disease prevention and control, chronic disease prevention and management, and the state of the health care delivery system in the NIS--encompassed partner achievements in a range of disciplines, from tracking antimicrobial resistance to diabetes care to health care financing reform.

At the conference's opening plenary session, several speakers warned that health care practitioners worldwide must be vigilant in monitoring the emergence and re-emergence of infectious diseases.

"We live in a time of rapid change ... entire populations are on the move, which influences the transmission of disease profoundly," said keynote speaker Frederick C. Robbins, PhD, Nobel laureate and professor and dean emeritus at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in Cleveland, Ohio.

Robbins said the traditional approaches to combating infections--public health and sanitary measures, anti-microbial therapies and vaccinations--often are "taken for granted" in industrialized nations and are beyond the reach of less developed nations. "However, where they can be applied," he added, "they have a profound effect upon the health of the community. Too often the public and even the medical profession are unaware of these basic public health measures and their importance for society as a whole."

Citing successful joint US-USSR efforts to develop vaccines for small pox and polio earlier this century, he said, "We can learn much from each other by sharing experience and conducting collaborative research ... This meeting represents an important step for global understanding and cooperation, and overcoming old suspicions."

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Laurie Garrett cautioned that deteriorating social and economic conditions in the NIS have led to spiraling drug use and prostitution, which in turn have resulted in rising numbers of hepatitis and HIV cases. No other region in the world has so many subtypes of HIV, she said. Of the 10 subtypes so far identified, the NIS has eight; India, by comparison, has two.

"No one at any hospital in any country can afford to be smug. No one can think that the spread of emerging infectious disease is anything but acute at this time," Garrett said.

"All of us involved in health care know we cannot solve the problems of infectious diseases, infection control, and chronic disease prevention and management unless we recognize those problems as being simultaneously local and global," added Thomas Lawley, MD, dean of Emory University Medical School.

In a videotaped address, US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke of her trip to Central Asia, Russia and Ukraine in November ([see related article](#)). "Health care issues are global

issues, and the partnerships offer the opportunities to develop global solutions," she said. "The special focus of this year's conference on new and re-emerging infectious diseases underscores this global challenge and our common goal of eradicating them."

She added that the conference's joint sponsorship by AIHA, the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Public Health Service served as "further evidence of the public-private partnerships that have been the hallmark of your program."

Armenian First Lady Ludmila Ter-Petrosian told conference participants that Mrs. Clinton had served as a role model for her own work as first lady, particularly in promoting health care for women and children. "I know that there are many political problems that are dividing people and that are dividing entire nations. Yet there is only one problem which affects all of us in every society--of course, that is guaranteeing the health of the individual," she said. "You cannot build paradise in one country if there is disease in the next country."

The future of the partnerships was broached by Donald Pressley, acting assistant administrator for USAID's Bureau for Europe and New Independent States. He lauded the partners for their work, but added that they need to explore ways to become self-sustaining as USAID support is phased out over coming years. He likened USAID's assistance program to a three-act play. Partners are now at the intermission between Acts I and II, he said, where USAID is beginning to move off center stage. Act III encompasses a time when the nations of the NIS and CEE are "true partners in a global market."

"As we go from the transition from Act I to Act II to Act III--when AID will not be a player in this story, but you standing alone, sustainable without our assistance, will continue the partnerships for years to come--our world will be better because of the very hard work that you have put in to make your partnerships a success."

William Chace, PhD, president of Emory University, lauded the efforts of AIHA's partnerships, noting that Emory has long participated in its own local health care partnership with organizations like the American Cancer Society, CARE and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Daniel Bourque, chairman of AIHA's board of directors and senior vice president of VHA, Inc., told participants that "the voluntarism that fuels each of your partnerships" lies at the heart of the program's triumphs. He noted that AIHA partnerships have yielded more than 5,000 professional exchanges and 100,000 person days of activity--all by volunteers--since 1992.

"Partnership resonates with deep meaning in this room ... It is characterized by trust and mutual respect. It fosters a common understanding, which leads to measurable progress," he said.